

A better look at religion's influence on political attitudes

September 15 2015



UC's Andrew Lewis and Stephen Mockabee have developed a new strategy to gather better, more nuanced perspective on how religion affects a person's political attitudes and behavior. Credit: [flickr.com/photos/61423903@N06/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/61423903@N06/)

Measuring how religion affects a person's political attitudes and behavior can provide powerful insight to everyone from pundits to presidents.

Now there's a new strategy to gather better, more nuanced perspective on that religious influence than ever before, developed by University of Cincinnati researchers.

UC's Andrew Lewis and Stephen Mockabee presented research titled "Measuring Biblical Interpretation and Its Influence on Political Attitudes" at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting earlier this month in San Francisco. The association serves thousands of members from more than 80 countries.

A better strategy for measuring religious beliefs will mean more accurate results, according to Lewis and Mockabee, political science faculty in UC's McMicken College of Arts & Sciences. Their new method also gives those surveyed improved confidence they're being appropriately portrayed in research and by the media, and generally contributes to their satisfaction with the democratic process - an important notion as campaign rhetoric heats up leading into next year's presidential election.

"In regard to the 2016 presidential election, as the media stories focus on conservative Protestants or evangelical Christians in Iowa, South Carolina and other early primary states, it truly matters how these individuals are classified," Lewis says.

Until now, broad surveys such as the General Social Survey and American National Election Studies typically asked people one basic question about the Bible. On these surveys, respondents could classify their interpretation of the Bible in one of three ways: as the word of God to be interpreted literally, as the inspired word of God but not interpreted literally word for word, or as a book written by men that is not God's word.

But Lewis and Mockabee suggest such limited questioning provides an insufficient representation of survey respondents' attitudes. And so they devised a way to dig more deeply into people's interpretation of the Bible by asking a set of questions comparing the traditional Bible items with functional interpretive exercises.

In July 2014, they sent an experimental survey to 1,850 participants recruited online. Among the questions on the survey, respondents were asked:

- to rate the accuracy of one of two randomly presented passages from the Hebrew Bible
- how much they agreed with an interpretation of the passage by a randomly assigned type of religious leader
- how they would describe those leaders
- how they might best describe their own interpretation of the passage

The survey also asked about two passages from the U.S. Constitution, as well as many additional political variables. Data gathered from the survey allowed the researchers to compare respondents' interpretive styles across biblical and constitutional contexts, finding considerable consistency between the two domains.

Lewis and Mockabee continued their investigation in June of this year with a survey of 1,200 evangelical Christians in which they developed four new follow-up questions to tap different aspects of interpretation. Respondents were asked whether they:

- apply biblical text to their own situation, not only to the historical context in which it was written
- rely on the plain meaning of the text
- look for literary devices such as metaphor or allegory that may alter the literal meaning
- think error is mixed with truth in the text

Mockabee says, "The standard 'literal/not literal' question was obscuring the different considerations people have in mind when they form an answer. We found that a respondent's opinion about whether the Bible

contains error was the strongest predictor of political conservatism."

By answering these in-depth, multi-context questions, survey respondents offer a clearer glimpse into how their religiosity relates to their [political attitudes](#) than what had been accomplished in previous studies. And better measurement, Lewis says, leads to better discussion.

"The implications for our improved measurement strategy are quite important for how we write and talk about religion and politics - particularly conservative religion and politics," Lewis says.

More information: community.apsanet.org/annualmeeting/home

Provided by University of Cincinnati

Citation: A better look at religion's influence on political attitudes (2015, September 15)
retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-religion-political-attitudes.html>

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